

Henry PURCELL (1659 - 1695): "Devotional songs & anthems"

La Rêveuse

Dir: Benjamin Perrot, Florence Bolton

rec: Nov 2014, Amilly (Loiret), Église Saint-Martin

Mirare - MIR 382 (© 2015) (70'03")

Liner-notes: E/D/F; lyrics - translations: D/F

Godfrey FINGER (c1655-1730): Division in g minor (RI-140); Division No. 8 in G; Sonata IV in d minor (RI-148); Henry PURCELL: Blessed is he that considereth the poor (Z 7); Hear me, O Lord, the great support (Z 133); How long, great God (The Aspiration) (Z 189)^b; I was glad (Z 19); Lord, not unto us (Z 137); O, I'm sick of life (Z 140); Plung'd in the confines of despair (Z 142); Since God so tender a regard (Z 143); When on my sick bed I languish (Z 144); With sick and famish'd eyes (Z 200)^a

Jeffrey Thompson (solo^a), Marc Mauillon (solo^b), *tenor*; Geoffroy Buffière, *baritone*; Florence Bolton, *viola da gamba*; Benjamin Perrot, *theorbo*; Pierre Gallon, *harpsichord, organ*

Musically speaking England experienced a splendid isolation until the 1650s. Composers were well aware of developments on the continent but only sporadically they integrated them in their own compositions. Some composers from the generation around 1600 were impressed by Italian madrigals and in some of Dowland's songs one can hear the influence of the modern Italian monody, but the musical climate was largely dominated by the *stile antico*. That was about to change around the middle of the 17th century, much to the sorrow of someone like Matthew Locke who stated: "I never yet saw any foreign composition worthy an English man's transcribing."

There were several factors which made the musical climate change. Firstly, in 1660 the monarchy was restored and Charles II who was crowned King that year "had an utter detestation of Fancys", as the theorist Roger North wrote. He preferred the dances he had heard during his exile in France. This resulted in a change of repertoire played at his court and written by composers associated with it. The second factor was an influx of performing musicians and composers from overseas, such as the violinists Thomas Baltzar from Germany and Nicola Matteis from Italy. The violin was known in England - John Jenkins was one of its exponents - but their style of playing was completely new. They introduced the kind of instrumental virtuosity which had emerged in Italy in the early decades of the 17th century and had been embraced in Germany. Another immigrant was the French recorder virtuoso Jacques Paisible who introduced the oboe - recently developed in his home country - and a recorder which was different from the renaissance instruments played in England.

Despite his short life Henry Purcell played a key role in the change from the *stile antico* to the *stile nuovo*. He was rooted in the contrapuntal tradition and during his formative years he copied and studied music of previous generations, going back as far as the 16th century. At the same time he included French and Italian influences in his compositions. In his instrumental music - for instance overtures to his anthems and his music for the stage - he paid tribute to the French style. In his vocal music the declamatory style which was a feature of Italian music is clearly discernible. That comes to the fore in the devotional songs which the ensemble La Rêveuse has recorded.

It is not quite clear what may have been Purcell's motivation to compose those songs. They were not intended for liturgical use: for his anthems Purcell used only texts from the Bible or from the Book of Common Prayer. The present disc includes three specimens of the latter genre. *Blessed is he that considereth the poor* is a setting of the first three verses from Psalm 41. The first eight verses from Psalm 122 are set in *I was glad* and *Lord, not to us* is a setting of the opening verse of Psalm 115. They fit well into the programme because stylistically they are not fundamentally different from the devotional songs.

Such songs are settings of free texts by poets from Purcell's own time or from the past. Among the former is John Patrick who wrote the text of at least nine of Purcell's devotional songs, among them *Since God so tender a regard* which is based on Psalm 116, and *Plung'd in the confines of despair*, after Psalm 130. The latter is a specimen of the many pieces of a rather gloomy character which constitute a substantial part of Purcell's devotional songs. Most of them are penitential and often turn "from contemplating man's sin to seeking or celebrating God's mercy" (Bruce Wood). This explains that Purcell frequently uses chromaticism and dissonants in his settings. He also makes use of eloquent musical figures to depict a text. Some striking examples can be found in *With sick and famish'd eyes*: the second stanza closes with the words: "Lord, I fall, yet call". On the word "fall" Purcell writes a deeply descending line, followed by a short ascending figure on "yet call". The opposite happens at the end of the piece: "[Heal] my troubled breast, which cries, which dies". The author of this text is George Herbert, an example of an author from the early 17th century (1593-1633). He is considered one of the so-called metaphysical poets who made frequent use of metaphors.

A contemporary of his was George Sandys; *O, I'm sick of life* is a paraphrase of Job 10 and taken from his *Paraphrase upon the Psalms and Hymns dispersed throughout the Old and New Testaments*. The closing episode of Purcell's setting is particularly expressive. Two poets from later times are Thomas Flatman (1635-1688), who wrote the text of *When on my sick bed I languish* - his poem is called *A Thought of Death* - and John Norris (1657-1712), the author of *How long, great God*.

The three soloists really make the most of these songs and anthems. Jeffrey Thompson is simply brilliant in *With sick and famish'd eyes*. The three together deliver **highly expressive interpretations** of the gloomy songs but also make a good impression in the pieces of a more uplifting nature. These songs are technically demanding, partly due to their declamatory character. It is understandable that it is assumed that these songs were intended for professional singers. In these songs and anthems Purcell mixes English tradition and Italian modernity.

The ensemble has added three instrumental pieces by Godfrey Finger to the programme. He was a professional gambist of Moravian birth (his original Christian name was Gottfried) who settled in London in the 1680s. He was appointed as a member of the royal chapel, but lost that job with the Glorious Revolution as King James had to leave the country for France. In the next years Finger played as a freelance musician and composed music for the stage. He was one of the contestants to the competition which took place in 1700 in which composers were invited to set a libretto by William Congreve, *The Judgement of Paris*, to music. Four composers took part, and Finger landed at fourth place. He considered this as the result of the partiality of the judges and later Charles Burney seemed to share his view as he called him "the best musician perhaps among the candidates". The disappointment led him to leave the country in 1701 and never to return. His pieces played bear witness to the instrumental virtuosity which was introduced in England from the continent. The choice of two divisions is particularly appropriate as this was a popular form in England and 'divisions on a ground' frequently appear in Purcell's oeuvre. The latter also wrote instrumental sonatas which he considered superior to "the levity and balladry of our neighbours", as he wrote in the preface to his *Sonatas of Three Parts* (1683), referring to the French. The *Sonata IV* by Finger is selected here because "with its mixture of Corellian and German traits, it reveals that Finger was as familiar as Purcell with the different European styles". Florence Bolton and her colleagues deliver **engaging performances of these pieces**.

This is a most fascinating and highly impressive disc which sheds light on a less familiar part of Purcell's oeuvre. The character and quality of the music and the outstanding performances make this disc a winner in every respect.